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Book Review of Pierre de Charentenay, S.J., The Philippines: An Asiatic and Catholic Archipelago

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Book Review

Pierre de Charentenay, S.J., *The Philippines: An Asiatic and Catholic Archipelago*. Quezon City, PH: Jesuit Communications Foundation Inc., 2016. 228 pp.

Originally published in French for a non-Filipino audience, this book on the history, politics, and religion of the Philippines is a very handy and readable social analysis and national situationer which Filipino educators can readily use for sociopolitical and even spiritual formation work, whether in formal or informal settings. A comparable book which also has the same initial purpose of introducing the Philippines to the outside world by providing a synoptic historical and sociopolitical analysis is David Joel Steinberg's, similarly titled, *The Philippines: A Single and a Plural Place*.¹ Steinberg's account, however, ends with the government of President Joseph Estrada. Father de Charentenay's book addresses more recent events and issues. But the two books can be read together and can enrich one another.

Sometimes it takes someone from outside looking in, with a keen and critical eye, and a heart that truly cares for the country and its people, through many years of immersion in the lives, struggles, and

¹ David Joel Steinberg, *The Philippines: A Single and a Plural Place*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

hopes of Filipinos, to tell the story of the Philippines as it is, not just to the world, but also to the Filipino community.

The central theme running throughout the book and its main organizing framework is eminent Jesuit historian Fr. Horacio V. de la Costa's insight on the hybridity of Filipino culture and institutions. Ours is a split culture—with fissures and disjoints between formal institutions and long-held informal norms and practices. Many of these formal rules and rituals were simply superimposed by colonial authorities on local community life and structures. Moreover, Filipino elites (political, economic, cultural) have become alienated from the lives, concerns, language, and wisdom of the poor. Projects ostensibly meant to foster economic development, rule of law and accountability, democratic citizenship, and social reform, do not resonate with and address the most pressing needs of the majority. Persistent divisions and hierarchies in political power, economic wealth, and cultural opportunities and practices (whether in education, media, and religion) have deepened the dualities and fractures in post-colonial Philippine society.

This hybridity is at the heart of the challenges and dilemmas of nation building and social transformation in the Philippines. The Filipino people, including many leaders, are often caught in the contradictory logics of personalism and particularism on one hand, and rational public institutions that should promote the common good, on the other.

Unfortunately, it is usually shrewd politicians like Ferdinand Marcos and Juan Ponce Enrile, or popular movie, television, and sports personalities like Joseph Estrada, Tito Sotto, and Manny Pacquiao who have been able to navigate the dualities and fractures in the culture and institutions in order to acquire and perpetuate themselves in power. They have been able to master the formal

legalism of the system and/or capitalize on the people's need to identify with larger-than-life celebrities who are at the same time seen as accessible and *maunawain*.² They have been able to project themselves as coming from and speaking the language of the poor. It is also because we see them so often in our movie, television and maybe even computer or cellphone screens, that they are viewed as if they are truly part of the family.

Even President Benigno S. Aquino III whose personal integrity has never been questioned, and whose government has made important strides in developing institutions of public accountability, transparency, and people's participation in governance, has often been criticized for being unable to free himself from the sort of personalism in decision-making that has led him to appoint government officials from among his *kaklase, kaibigan, at kabarilan*.³

Moreover, as Father de Charentenay observes, two keys to inclusive and sustainable development—the formulation and implementation of a rational land use plan and the strengthening and proper enforcement of the Philippine labor code as a lever for socioeconomic change—have been hampered by concessions to particularistic interest groups in mining, real estate, construction, and shopping malls which some also see as drivers of economic growth (114–16).

Father de Charentenay says that the President is caught between two logics: “an economic and juridical logic that leads to properly functioning, professional branches of government with mutual respect for the law and for each other's boundaries”; and “the political culture of the country that leads to compromises,

² Someone who has empathy; an understanding person.

³ Friends, classmates, and shooting buddies.

arrangements and temptations that, even with the best of intentions, remain outside the legal framework” (170). The resulting hybrid policies are as problematic as the country’s cultural hybridities.

Civil society and the Church are also not immune from these ambiguities. Father de Charentenay says some problems in the post-EDSA context stem from the confusion of roles and institutions. And even if the law attempts to define distinctions, these legal rules often are unable to capture the complexities of local culture. This is true in the confusion of roles between political parties and civil society, which becomes paralyzing for both. “The result is both civil society and political parties are stunted in their growth and are unresponsive to one another.” This confusion was demonstrated in the case of former priest Among Ed Panlilio who became governor of Pampanga in the 2007 election. “Instead of demonstrating the capabilities of a new style and a new government program, the new leaders returned to their usual activity of advocacy. There is a big difference between governing and lobbying, which they did not understand” (279).

On the reproductive health bill/law issue, Father de Charentenay sees that there has been a conflation between religious law and civil law. The two logics of the secular and Catholic have begun to diverge. Even as the Church wants to guide and shape the views and actions of Filipino Catholics, its religious position cannot be equated with public policy which applies to all citizens and not just the Catholic faithful. “She must now submit herself to the democratic system and its sovereign decisions. For its part, the democratic power is unable to give priority to a particular religious position in a pluralistic society” (197–98).

Although it is not an explicit argument of the book, Father de Charentenay’s use of Father de la Costa’s insights can lead to a

realization that the same hybridities are also at play during the Filipino people's moments of greatest success and triumph. But during those times, these characteristics have come together in a creative synthesis to transcend personal purposes to achieve the social good. It is in this sense that Father de Charentenay calls the 1986 EDSA Revolution a “founding act” for the Filipino people, akin to the French revolution (83).

On the surface and in significant ways, EDSA was a spontaneous mobilization of individuals and groups, many of whom came together as schoolmates, officemates, friends, and family members. It was a direct response to a personal appeal from Jaime Cardinal Sin over Radio Veritas to surround the military camps and protect the rebel soldiers. But it was also underpinned by a longer process of painstaking education, organization, and mobilization that had been going on since the late 1960s and early 1970s, but especially after the assassination of former senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., on August 21, 1983, in what was then called the “parliament of the streets.” These formative experiences in active non-violence as a strategy, principle and even spirituality, led to the internalization among key EDSA participants of what Fr. Jose Blanco, S.J., termed *alay dangal*.⁴ It was a new political translation of *bayanihan*⁵ inspired by Ninoy's heroic self-sacrifice.

More immediately, EDSA emerged out of a strategic decision to support Corazon C. Aquino in the snap presidential election, to protect the ballot in an organized manner through the National

⁴ The word literally means a gift or offering of human dignity.

⁵ The traditional Filipino custom of townmates helping a neighbors who are moving their residence to a different location. In the past, it meant actually helping carry the nipa hut itself. The broader meaning is that of a community endeavor. The root word is *bayani* which means hero—thus communal heroism.

Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), and to protest the massive electoral fraud and violence through a calculated civil disobedience campaign. A key catalyst was the historic post-election statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)⁶ which declared the Marcos government as having "no moral basis" because it had deliberately subverted the people's will in the electoral process. For the bishops, what was called for was a "non-violent struggle for justice." Thus even though what the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) and Juan Ponce Enrile had planned and tried to carry out was a military coup, what resulted was a massive popular uprising for democratization.

But as Father de Charentenay writes:

Christians' participation were surprisingly mundane, yet effective: personal contact with soldiers, women's participation, prayers in front of the soldiers, a young priest celebrating his first Mass on the barricades, with the most iconic being tanks surrounded by nuns saying the rosary or carrying statues of the Virgin. These events touched a cultural and religious background common to all belligerents, including the dictator threatened It matched the culture of a people whose religion was part of it. Nowhere is civil society that close to spirituality and Catholicism. (80; 83)

There is an important dimension to the CBCP post-election statement of February 13, 1986, that needs to be highlighted. The pastoral letter is sometimes represented mainly as a political

⁶ CBCP, "Post-Election Statement," February 13, 1986, http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1980s/1986-post_election.html.

statement from the bishops repudiating the Marcos government and calling for non-violent resistance. But what can be missed in such an account is that even as the bishops were making a moral (and political) judgment, it was coming from a sincere desire and effort to listen to, be immersed in, and be one with the Filipino people. Such a stance owed much to Bishop Francisco Claver's deep experience and understanding of and keen vision for the Philippine Church and society. Note this crucial part of the text which he drafted:

We therefore ask every loyal member of the Church, every community of the faithful, to form their judgment about the February 7 polls. And if in faith they see things as we the bishops do, we must come together and discern what appropriate actions to take that will be according to the mind of Christ. In a creative, imaginative way, under the guidance of Christ's Spirit, let us pray together, reason together, decide together, act together, always to the end that the truth prevail, that the will of the people be fully respected Now is the time to speak up. Now is the time to repair the wrong That depends fully on the people, on what they are willing and ready to do. We, the bishops, stand in solidarity with them in the common discernment for the good of the nation.⁷

In the same spirit of solidarity, what Father de Charentenay presents in this book is not only a particular historical and sociopolitical analysis of the Philippines. He provides not just the substance for a national situationer. He also provides a way of proceeding, a way of doing social analysis. It is significant that in

⁷ Ibid.

writing this book, he not only did secondary historical and sociopolitical research on the Philippines. He also immersed himself in the day-to-day lives and concerns of the marginalized and excluded: the typhoon victims of Tacloban and Palo in Leyte; the inmates of the New Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa; the patients and doctors of the Philippine General Hospital in Manila; Gawad Kalinga communities in Payatas, Leyte, and Mindanao; and the distinctive faith experiences and popular devotions of ordinary Filipinos—the Nazareno in Quiapo, the Sto. Niño in Cebu, the Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga, and the Simbang Gabi novena in various parishes around the country.

But the challenge as both Father de Charentenay and Father de la Costa have posed is how this kind of expression of faith can help reinterpret social norms and practices, and thus have an impact on social reality in a way that promotes social justice in the Philippines.

Pope Francis has embraced popular piety as a venue for personal and social change. In the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes: “Popular piety enables us to see how the faith once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on. Once looked down upon, popular piety came to be appreciated once more in the decades following the Council.” He quotes from Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that popular piety “manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know . . . it makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of bearing witness to belief.”⁸

From such a perspective, this kind of engagement with the peripheries can be a starting point for the new evangelization. An

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: An Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana/Pasig City: Paulines Publishing House, 2013), 90.

important part of such a mission is forming leaders and helping build institutions—engaging hybridity in a way that touches what is deeply personal in a particular cultural context but also harnessing a communal response for the common good.

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